

SYMBOLISM IN THE SELECT POEMS OF W.B.YEATS

***Afrin Bankalagi. G.P.Porwal Arts, Commerce, V.V.Salimath Science College, Sindagi.**

Abstract

This paper attempts to study select poems **W. B. Yeats**: who was very influenced by the French **symbolist** movement and he is often regarded as the most important **symbolist** poet. He was a dreamer and visionary, who were fascinated by folk-lore, ballad and superstitions of the Irish peasantry. Yeats poems are fully conversant with the Irish background, the Irish mythologies etc. Yeats has tried to bring back the “simplicity” and “altogetherness” of the earlier ages and blend it with the modern ideas of good and evil. William Butler Yeats is regarded as one of the most important representative symbolist of the twentieth century English literature who was mainly influenced by the French symbolist movement of 19th century. Symbolism as a conscious movement was born in France as a reaction against naturalism and the precision and exactitude of the 'naturalist' school represented by Emile Zola. The French symbolists, led by Mallarme, condemned mere "exteriority", and laid great emphasis on the treatment of the sensations or the representation of the vague, fleeting impressions that constantly pass before the mind's eye. It meant a virtual withdrawal from the life, a concentration on its experience and its expression through the use of symbols.

Before the French movement Yeats had already experimented his poetry with symbolism and after the rise of French symbolism he was more determined and devoted to it. In order to comprehend his poetry, one has to be familiar with his own version of complex symbolism, magic, history, occultism and theosophy. Symbolism is a major way of conveying Yeats's ideas who wants to say more than what meets the eye wants to suggest something beyond the expressed meaning. His symbolism was based upon the poetry of Blake, Shelley and Rosette. But, more than that, his symbolism was based upon his reading of books on the occult from the works of Madame Blavatsky Yeats learned that Anima Mundi, a reservoir of all that has touched mankind, may be evoked by symbols. He also became acquainted with the doctrine of correspondences, the doctrine of signatures, and the doctrine of magical in connotations and symbols which have power over spiritual and material reality.

Key words: poetry, symbolism, writing, Yeats, history, occultism, theosophy.

Introduction

After the First World War, the “Symbolist Movement” began in France. This movement influenced the English poets profusely. Yeats is one of them. W. B. Yeats is one of the foremost poets in English literature even today. He was considered to be one of the most important symbolists of the 20th century. He has been called the ‘chief representative’ of the “Symbolist Movement” in English literature. In his poems, he uses a lot of symbols for

various purposes in various contexts. Symbolism is the use of one object to represent another in literature. A symbol may be a figure of speech or a literal word that assumes an extra meaning. For example, the rose for beauty, the rising sun for birth and the white colour for purity are conventionally accepted public symbols. A symbol may also be a private created by a particular writer. Symbols may be of two kinds (1) Traditional and (2) Personal. Traditional symbols are such stock symbols as have been in general use. For instance, 'rose' is a traditional. Symbol of beauty and has been in use in poetry from the earliest times. As a majority of readers are familiar with such stock symbols their use increases the charm and pleasure of poetry without introducing any element of complexity or obscurity. Personal symbols, however, are devised by the poet for his own purposes, to express the vague fleeting impressions passing through his mind, or to convey his own sense of the mystery of life.

To comprehend and thereby fully appreciate Yeats's poetry requires some knowledge of the forces working together to form the basis of his philosophy and the symbolic system Yeats's view of the artistic function of the imagination and of the symbol and the development of his personal symbolic system are made clear in this chapter. W. B. Yeats has been regarded as a great symbolic poet. Arthur Symons dedicated his book "The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1919)" to W. B. Yeats and called him "the chief representative of that movement in our country". The Symbolist movement began in France. Its high Priest was Stephane Mallarme. Yeats has already much in common with the symbolists. Both aimed at something elusive and intangible. Both were subjective, alike in method and natural mode of thought. In Yeats own words, "a symbol is the possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame - - - ." They express the poet's experiences which are often of a mystical nature. As the readers are not familiar with such symbols, they create difficulties for them, though at the same time they add to the charm and dignity of the language. Beast imagery carries note worthy significance in Yeats poetry. The unicorn and "The Slouching animal form" in "The second coming" are two fabulous creatures which are used as symbols by Yeats in his poems. The unicorn has traditionally been taken as an emblem of the soul. The slouching beast or the monster in "The second coming" is symbolic of the appear an of a new civilization antithetical to the present Christian civilization: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon can't hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre can't hold Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The falcon here is a symbol of intellect and the falconer is a symbol of soul. Byzantium is used by Yeats as a symbol of the „dance“ often appears in Yeats poetry and it is also closely related with Yeats „system“. Yeats generally uses this symbol to intricate either patterned movement or joyous energy. "Helen being chosen found life flat and dull and later had much trouble from a fool." The above mentioned lines from "A Prayer for My Daughter" are highly symbolic. Here Helen symbolizes destructive beauty and is linked with Maud Gonne. In the same poem, the Horn of Plenty and „the laurel tree“ are symbols of place, prosperity and happiness: "Ceremony's name for the rich horn and custom for the spreading laurel tree." Yeats often uses his personal possessions buildings (The Tower etc.) in a symbolic manner Yeats use of symbols from Irish Mythology and the occult also play an important role. In "A Dialogue of self and soul" we

get it opposing symbols. Sato's sword and the winding stairs. The winding stairs lead to darkness but Sato's sword symbolizes the path of escape. Thus Yeats was a great symbolist right from the beginning of his career to the very end. However Yeats symbolic technique differs radically from that of the French symbolists Yeats symbols are not vague, undifferentiated and emotional. They are haste and wiry in the tradition of those in the poetry of William Blake. According to Tynadall: Symbols made it possible for Yeats to express "the richness of Man's deeper reality" which is something essentially mystical.

OBJECTIVE:

This paper intends to explore and analyze development of the **symbolic** system and the **symbolism** of Yeats's **poetry**

The Symbolism of Poetry

"Easter 1916" is remarkable for the depth and intensity of symbols which have three characteristic features: directness of expression illuminated by unexpected symbols, a tone of tragic solemnity and a professional quality. In the first stanza of the poem, the 'close of day' conveys the image of an evening sky. In this poem, the word 'stream' symbolizes change and 'stone' symbolizes immobility and petrification. At the end of poem, the poet utters:

"All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born".

"The second coming" is another famous symbolic poem of Yeats. In this poem, the 'ceremony of innocence' represent for Yeats for one of the qualities that made life valuable under the dying aristocratic social tradition. The expression 'falcon and the falconer' have a symbolic meaning. A falcon is a hawk and a hawk is the symbol of the active or intellectual mind and 'the falconer' symbolizes the soul of it.

"A prayer for My Daughter" is another symbolic poem of Yeats. In this poem, the word 'tower' suggests Yeats' vision of the dark future of humanity. It is used to suggest loneliness and seclusion tradition or national heritage. Again, 'linnet' symbolizes innocent and cheerful thoughts and 'leaf' symbolizes the soul of a person.

"Sailing to Byzantium" is another symbolic poem by W.B. Yeats. Here in this poem, Yeats has used the elemental symbols of earth, air, fire and water. To Yeats Byzantium is a symbol for unity and perfection. Yeats was drawn to Byzantium and its golden age because he felt that they represented a kind of unity and perfection such as the world had never known before or since. In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Byzantium' becomes the symbol of a perfect world.

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is another important symbolic poem by Yeats. In this poem, Yeats says us his homesickness. The poet has become weary of London life and so he desires to return at once to the Lake Isle in his own country Ireland. He knows that in Ireland he can enjoy a peaceful life. The Lake Isle of Innisfree is the symbol of a peaceful place. If one begins the reverie with any beautiful lines that one can remember, one finds they are like those by Burns. Begin with this line by Blake:

"The gay fishes on the wave when the moon sucks up the dew"

or these lines by Nash:

"Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye"

or these lines by Shakespeare:

"Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
Who once a day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover"

or take some line that is quite simple, that gets its beauty from its place in a story, and see how it flickers with the light of the many symbols that have given the story its beauty, as a sword-blade may flicker with the light of burning towers.

W.B. Yeats as a Symbolist

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind.

It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree.

Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not "the eye altering alter all"?

"Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart."

A rebel against the world of matter, Yeats learned that all material things correspond to concepts in the world of spirit, and that through the use of material object as magical symbols the specialist may summon disembodied powers,. In 1925, Yeats announced an occult system of his own (in his essay called "A Vision"). The main element in A Vision is Yeats's view of history. He saw history as series of cyclical processes. He saw time made up of opposing cycles lasting tow thousand years, and he used the diagrams of opposing gyres to illustrate them, a gyre being the espial path traced out on a come. Each age was seen as the reversal of the previous age. The Second Coming conveys the terror of a coming of antithetical civilization. This poem creates its effect by its images, by disgust at prevalent anarchy, by horror at the overcoming of innocence, and by its revelation of what is to convey the image of the rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem. In his search for a compensating tradition, Yeats went first to romantic literature, and then to mysticism of one kind and another, to folklore, theosophy, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism, and finally elaborated a symbolic system of his own, based on a variety of sources, giving order and proportion to his insights. He became more and more himself, he shed his coat of mythological embroidery for a colloquial but ceremonial nakedness, a precisions, strength and symbolic density all his own.

W. B. Yeats and the Medium of Poetry

In the collection *The Tower*, Yeats achieved a kind of ripeness in disillusion. The scorn so pervasive before is gone. "Sailing to Byzantium" is the opening poem of this volume. The poem reflects the interest in Byzantium art felt by Yeats since his visit to Ravenna, a city whose churches contain the finest of all Byzantine mosaics. Yeats saw in Byzantine culture what he called the "unity of being," a state in which are and life inner-penetrated each other. Rejected by the cruel world of birth, generation, and death as obsolete, the poet determines to sail to a place where he will be appreciated, namely, Byzantium. He hopes that he will thus be able to defeat time, because art is timeless. He wants to sail from sensual music made by the birds-that "dying generation" to the ethereal music made by the By Byzantine birds of hammered gold and gold enameling. And, yet, in spite of the favor of his resolution, this is a poem of regret, uncertainty and the rootlessness that follows rejections.

Further, his symbolism is fully and firmly grounded in Irish mythology and legend and this fact imparts to it a precision, definiteness, a clear lucidity, which the French symbolism is wanting in. Yeats' symbols are not vague or hazy. They have well-defined forms which perceptible meet the eye. They are thus not quite obscure and indistinct.

Yeats' symbolism has yet another characteristic quality which makes it stand apart from the French symbolism. The symbols of Yeats are all-pervasive. There are certain key-symbols round which a number of poems are arranged, and each poem that follows in succeeding order throws light on foregoing ones and illuminates their sense. For example, in *The Rose Volume* of verses, rose is the key-symbol. In these poems, rose symbolically stands for intellectual Beauty, beauty of woman (particularly that of Maud Gonne), austerity and also Ireland. Such symbols are not adapted suddenly on the spur of the moment but they are firmly planted in mythology and legends. Likewise, in the poem *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the swan is the ever-recurring symbol. Another symbol which constantly glitters in Yeats' poetry is Helen, symbolizing destructive beauty, and the linking up of Helen with Dierdre and Maud Gonne furnishes to the poems like *No Second Troy* an unthinkable vastness, complexity and continuous expansiveness. As his art grew to maturity, Yeats' symbols become more and more complex and personal. This complex nature of symbols is manifest in the poems included in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* group of the poems. The Tower symbol partakes of both traditional and personal character. It was a tower of real physical existence where the poet lived for some time, and at the same time it is used as a symbol of loneliness and isolation, a secluded place of retreat for the poet.

In *A Prayer for my Daughter*; the tower hints at the poet's vision of the dark and dismal future of humanity. All these associations and suggestions associated with the tower, make it a symbol of high complexity. While they add to the richness and elegance of the poem they also add to the perplexity and bewilderment of the reader. The complexity of symbolism is no less intriguing in the Byzantium group of the poems. Such intricacy of symbols increases the obscurity of Yeats' poetry. Yeats was a symbolist from the very outset of his poetic career up to the last, even before and after the brief spell of the French influence. As his powers attained maturity, his symbols

acquired richness of associations, evocative quality and intricacy. Symbolism enabled him to make his vision and traces concrete and substantial. Only in this way he could convey to his readers a definite picture of his vague, fleeting sensations and experiences. Symbolism helped him to express the richness of man's deeper reality, something mystical in essence.

Conclusion

Yeats poetry is replete with symbols and images. He has been regarded as one of the greatest symbolists in English Literature. Arthur Symonds dedicated his book "The symbolist movement in literature (1991)" to W.B. Yeats and called him "The chief representative of that movement in our country", A symbol is basically a suggestive invocation. In Yeats's own words "a symbol is the possible expression of some visible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame. Yeats made use of complex system of symbol in his poems. In Jungian psychology it is stated that great symbols well up from the depth of the racial memory. Yeats describes this racial memory as "Anima Mundi" or „Spiritual Mundi.“ He draws his symbols liberally from Irish folk-lore, mythology, alchemy, magic occult, philosophy, metaphysics, paintings, drawings etc. His symbols and images belong to a very wide range of areas nature, animals, birds, religion, personal possessions, historical events and phenomenon, mystic processes etc. Symbols are of two types the traditional and personal Yeats use of them ranges from the conventional to the most personal and unexpected. Some of the important symbols used in his poetry are birds, beasts, mythical creatures, the tower, the rose, Helen etc. Besides these there are other semi-mystical and philosophical symbols like gyres and cones. To sum up, we may say that Yeats' use of symbols is complex and rich. Indeed, in Yeats' poetry, symbols give dumb things voices and bodiless things bodies. We may consider Yeats as a great symbolist. Yeats makes use of a complex system of symbols in his poems. It is both a traditional as well as a personal symbol.

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